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Research • Planning • Professional Development  
for California Community Colleges

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# Middle Leaders in College Redesign

Leading from the Middle 2019

Executive Summary

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# Introduction

California Community Colleges are engaged in a range of institutional redesign efforts, including implementing Guided Pathways and reconstructing the entry to transfer-level mathematics and English courses. The intention of these redesigns is to make students' educational experiences more coherent, effective, and equitable. These transformational efforts involve changes in campus policies, procedures, and practices, and they require leadership, not only from the executive level but also from middle leaders.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) launched Leading from the Middle (LFM) in 2013 to develop and support middle leaders in community colleges across California. Development of middle leaders became increasingly important over the last decade when statewide initiatives, such as the Basic Skills Initiative, created opportunities for faculty and staff members to take on positions as coordinators and directors of programs designed to improve the student experience. The opportunities for middle leaders to contribute to college redesign efforts increased even more as community colleges implement Guided Pathways and reconstruct entry-level mathematics and English courses aligned with Assembly Bill (AB) 705.

## LFM Program Design

LFM is a one-year hands-on professional learning program that gives community college educators the opportunity to develop and deepen their leadership skills. The LFM academy design reflects the literature on effective professional development. LFM is experiential, directly related to practice, and undertaken collaboratively with colleagues. The academy has two interconnected components: three face-to-face convenings that take place over the course of a calendar year (February, June, and October) and coaching by a former LFM participant that is provided during and between convenings.

LFM's curricular content spans leadership and the change process. Every year, new topics, readings, and activities are added to reflect current conditions. Beyond the core topics of understanding the change process, planning, communicating, building coalitions, and taking risks, LFM 2019 focused on developing colleges' capacity to use data and evidence. The data modules gave teams the opportunity to examine their own local data and to practice potentially difficult conversations about data.

LFM 2019 served 26 college teams through two statewide academies, engaging a total of 130 community college educators. Among the participating colleges, 11 had attended LFM 2018 and returned to continue their work.

## In This Report

This year's report focuses on the roles middle leaders play in Guided Pathways. The body of the report is organized by the three overarching outcomes of Leading from the Middle, moving from the broadest institutional level to the individual outcomes:

- ***Leading a college change initiative*** is the action at the heart of LFM. This section describes the ways that middle leaders have applied leadership strategies and tools at their colleges, particularly in Guided Pathways, and what they have learned about using data in the redesign process.
- ***Relationship-building and collaboration*** are inherently part of middle leadership. This section describes development of relationships within the cross-functional team and ways that the team members have come to function collaboratively.
- ***Leadership development*** grows out of hands-on experience and reflection. This section describes individuals' sense of their own growth as leaders. With the hands-on experiences of using tools and applying skills as part of a collaborative team, novice leaders gain the confidence to see themselves as leaders.

The report concludes with a brief look to next steps for LFM.

## LFM 2019: Middle Leaders in College Redesign

Guided Pathways provides a flexible framework that focuses on creating coherent educational experiences for students. The approach means that each college shapes its redesign effort to fit its campus, culture, and community. The LFM Academy gave participants the opportunity to apply leadership skills and strategies to implement a particular aspect of Guided Pathways.

The three overarching LFM outcomes—from the broadest institutional view to the collaborative team to the individual growth—provide a lens for examining this progress.

### Leading a College Change Initiative

In the LFM curriculum, the campus redesign project provides the context for participants to apply their growing leadership skills. Through discussions and graphic tools, teams map out their local culture, develop a communication and engagement plan, and strategically prepare for implementation. Hearing the experiences of other colleges at the LFM academy helps teams understand the local strengths and needs of their own college.

## College Projects and Progress in Guided Pathways

Several colleges focused on the Guided Pathways tasks of developing program maps and meta-majors. For example:

*Our goal was to make the case for GP, and to get started on **program mapping**. We held two **student journey workshops** in the spring where we gathered lots of qualitative data about what is working and what needs improvement. We also held two student panels where we gathered student input. Success: Flex Day with faculty was very well-attended and well-received. Struggle: Getting faculty to meaningfully engage in program mapping.*

Other college teams focused on projects that addressed entry to college and orientation as well as, in this example, creating a path for undeclared students:

*Our project (Seven Seas) was a set of classes that a first year, **undeclared major** could take that would 1) satisfy local GE requirements, 2) transfer to both CSUs and UCs, and 3) keep them on track to complete a degree. The idea was generated entirely at LFM meetings. Our team advocated for the Seven Seas with administration and with PC committees. We are also brainstorming marketing ideas.*

## Data in College Redesign

The data sessions covered a range of tools available to analyze and share relevant data. Participants examined their own college data as well as composite state data. Data became a strong resource when teams made their cases for change:

*A success in using LFM data tools is to be able **to establish the "why" in pathways conversations**. Presenting data on how long it takes students to complete degrees and how many units they are accruing is helpful in looking at the student experience and investigating why these trends are occurring. It's also important to disaggregate data and identify equity gaps. It helps us think about how we can better help our students.*

Data was useful as well to engage colleagues and as part of professional development:

*The approaches to data learned through our LFM experience [have] been extremely helpful. We have been able to integrate data in our pitch discussions and preliminary marketing. **Through our use of data, we were able to gain more buy-in from key stakeholders** at our institution.*

*Our project for the year was to figure out how to **help employees at our campus learn data literacy**, and the project we tackled in service of this goal was to develop a f-2-f data coaching training course. Our LFM team is in charge of developing the content, promoting, facilitating, and collecting feedback about the workshops, and making*

*adjustments as we begin to build the capacity of our colleagues for finding, interpreting, and using the data to inform decisions that impact student success.*

College teams that came to LFM with the goal of creating a data coaching program or a campus-wide data literacy initiative found the data content relevant and applicable. Participants described their progress:

*Our LFM team was tasked (by our VPSS and other administration) with creating a data coaching training program. At the end of last semester, our team was invited to join our Guided Pathways team of about 40 people. From the start, it was planned to have **a data coach as a part of the student success teams that correspond with each pathway**. We have been deciding on the roles and expectations of a data coach and how they would assist on the student success teams.*

*This year's project is related to **democratizing data** and building a dashboard that will hopefully help to move data from interesting to actionable.*

## Relationship-Building and Collaboration

Middle leaders work in a network of relationships. These relationships are sources of support, communication, and information. Moreover, they keep a human face on leadership. While many relationships might be rooted in commonality and a shared perspective, others may be valuable because they provide insight into different perspectives and opinions.

### Team Development

Participants come to LFM as part of a cross-functional team, with colleagues from different parts of the college. LFM 2019 teams were also part of their colleges' Guided Pathways leadership or design teams. Working effectively together, they could contribute tools and resources to the larger campus effort.

Effective team development rests on drawing on the different strengths that individuals bring. Participants summed up what their teams learned by engaging different perspectives:

*We have learned **that four minds are better than one**. This is my first time with the team, so for me it was all about observing and learning from others.*

*We have learned that **we ALL have a role in this process**, and that it is not up to one person to be in charge of everything. Our LFM team is amazing! We all have different strengths that come out in our work together.*

One participant described the collaborative nature of middle leadership in terms of mutual support and sharing the struggles:

*We have learned that if one person doesn't have the strength to go on, or the direction to carry the torch, that someone else can pick up and carry on until they no longer can see the path or carry the torch. **We have learned that there is no room for judgement and no room for recriminations, there is only room for support.***

Participants also acknowledged productive challenges in the process of team development, particularly as they identified next steps:

*Our team was actually quite collaborative and I was very proud that we all had such different opinions and still managed to work together. We definitely **need to get out of the analyze stage and into the let's move stage!***

*We learned that **collaborative leadership can be messy**, but it results in increased buy-in, enthusiasm, and effort. Our greatest strength as a team was our stick-to-it-iveness and enthusiasm, even lacking proper direction and encountering vocal resistance to our ideas. We can definitely work on transitional communication between our group and [our college's] next LFM team.*

The LFM coach provides ongoing support to the team and to the development of its project. The coaches are not content experts on Guided Pathways; rather, they are prepared to listen, ask questions, and share their own experiences when relevant. Team members appreciated the ways that their coaches were able to ease sticky points and prompt teams to think harder. For example:

*Our coach is amazing—**she helps us think big-picture and stay focused**. Her experience with the literature, tools, and GP at her own campus have greatly informed and contributed to our work, including the love for play and community building.*

## Developing and Deepening Identity as a Leader

From the beginning of LFM, program organizers understood that developing identity as a leader was a central outcome for academy participants. Over time, observations and evaluations have shown that participants' sense of leadership grows out of action and experience. As middle leaders gain knowledge and apply skills and strategies, their sense of identity and confidence grows.

This development of leadership identity has been particularly salient for participants who enter LFM reluctant to see themselves as leaders. With support and experience, many of these novice or emerging leaders surprise themselves by stepping up to the challenges and satisfactions of leadership.

Over the years of LFM, some participants have described their presence as being “voluntold,” in other words, being directed to “volunteer” for LFM by their colleges. They came without a clear

understanding of their roles or their own leadership capacities. One reluctant leader summed up the surprise, appreciation, and evolution in response to the LFM experience:

***I began as “voluntold” and then I was sold.** This experience has helped me to share leadership especially as we had such a wonderfully diverse team and met even more wonderfully diverse colleagues.*

At the end of the year-long academy, participants reflected on the complexity of the change process and reported that they felt better prepared to meet the challenges of leadership:

***I have learned to expect the hard moments and moments of resistance.** I am still learning to cope with them and find the optimism that we can move past them. I think the tools we used to see the bigger picture are helping with this, and also knowing that I can turn to my LFM team when experiencing challenging leadership moments.*

*Leadership is hard! Part of leadership is leading and facilitating difficult conversations and engaging with resistance. **I didn't realize the degree to which leadership is about communication and empowerment and not necessarily directing or managing.** I may lack a title or official authority, but I still have a sphere of influence and leadership radiates from that.*

Participants succinctly conveyed what they had learned about themselves as leaders in terms that could be printed as a banner:

***It helped me be a change agent on my campus** by understanding that there are a ton of tools and resources at my disposal.*

*[I learned] that there are tools I can use now in my position to help move work forward. **That it is completely possible for me to be a leader while being a classified staff [member].***

***I have learned that anyone, regardless of title/position at the college, can be leader in his/her own way and offer vital contribution to the college.** It is important to be at the table when decisions are being made because one's input/experience can make a difference.*

## Conclusion

This internal report is based on survey responses from participants in the two LFM 2019 statewide academies. This overview gives insights into the development of middle leaders and the roles of middle leaders in college redesign. The voices of the middle leaders reflect their experiences in LFM and how they have applied LFM skills and strategies to their college redesign efforts.

Responses from participants illustrate multiple ways that middle leaders are able to advance the redesign process. Most of the LFM teams were part of their college-wide design teams and were able to directly translate planning tools and strategies to their college efforts.

The participants' responses also underscore the importance of middle leaders as change agents in the current system-wide redesign efforts. It is becoming evident that not only do middle leaders play essential roles in changing their institutions, they will also be vital in sustaining the spirit of the change, keeping the focus on the student experience, and maintaining a sense of inquiry and evidence to continue improvement and innovation.

## Future Directions for LFM

At the conclusion of the 2019 academies, LFM had ambitious plans for 2020: two statewide academies that would focus on the student experience and draw on findings from the RP Group study, *Student Support Re(defined)*, and a third statewide academy that would expand the focus on data tools, analysis, and application. In collaboration with the North/Far North Regional Coordinators, LFM planned a fourth academy for small rural colleges in the Far North that have rarely been able to participate in statewide LFM academies. This academy was planned to be a hybrid with the central content delivered online and an LFM coach at each site.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, two of the statewide academies had begun. However, like all system instruction and services, professional development had to be moved online. This situation presents a new challenge for LFM and for middle leaders to apply leadership strategies in a transitional and rapidly changing environment.

## The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California community colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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